

# SERVICE LEARNING

## A CATALYST FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HESD?

### Context

The research was part of the project BINK (German acronym for Educational Institutions and Sustainable Consumption). The project was carried out between 2008 and 2012 with support from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The objective was to explore how educational institutions can promote sustainable consumption among youths and young adults. The seminar concept presented on this poster sought to utilize the service learning approach for participatory organisational development processes towards greater sustainability,

### Objectives

The seminar concepts developed in the project BINK sought to stimulate learning processes in two ways:

- (1) by means of active and participatory service learning for the students in the seminar
- (2) through changes in the organisational culture of consumption as a setting for incidental learning among the broader student population of the university

### Key Challenges & Lessons Learnt

Based on the experiences made in the three project seminars, the following favorable conditions and challenges for implementing participatory approaches can be identified.

#### Favorable learning conditions

The design of the project seminars reflects key educational principles of an experiential service-learning approach after Kolb & Kolb (2005)<sup>1</sup> that helped to create an environment encouraging participation:

- The students' experiences as consumers on campus were not only respected, but also utilized as a starting point for developing project ideas.
- The setting allowed students to link their project ideas to their individual interests and thus to further develop their expertise in these fields.
- The transdisciplinary approach encouraged students to take the perspective of their partners in practice into account and to engage in discursive processes with them.
- The development of project ideas was supported by theoretical inputs and peer feedback processes.

#### Challenges

- Participation bears the risks of reproducing the status quo and of “conveying a collective simulation of sustainable development rather than a critical and creative problem-solving process” (Læssøe 2010: 54)<sup>2</sup>

#### Lessons learnt

- The perspective of transdisciplinarity expands conventional service learning approaches that are prone to conceptualize participation rather as a *means* than as an *end* in itself.
- Genuine participation in higher education for sustainable development inevitably requires a critical engagement with the idea of sustainability and with power relations.

<sup>1</sup> Kolb, A.Y. & Kolb, D.A. (2005). Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 4, 193–212.

<sup>2</sup> Læssøe, J. (2010). Education for sustainable development, participation and sociocultural change. *Environmental Education Research*, 16(1), 39–57.

### Realization: Project Courses

**Course objectives and approach:** In the course small groups of students conducted projects together with partners in practice (providers of consumption-related offers on campus). These projects aimed at stimulating incidental learning processes relating to sustainable consumption. The collaboration mode was designed according to the principles of transdisciplinary research: both parties ought to be mutually involved in the process from the constitution of the research question and the implementation of the project to the integration of different perspectives and knowledges in the evaluation of the project. In total, three project courses were offered between 2009 and 2011 (see Table).

Seminar title	Education for Sustainable Consumption	KonsUmsicht	KonsUmsicht 2.0
Semester	Winter 2009/10	Winter 2010/11	Summer 2011
No of students	32	12	17
Study level (semester)	3	2-6	2-6
Study program	BA Env. Science.	BA complementary studies	
Project Examples	Example A	Example B	Example C

**Process:** The project courses were structured in three phases: (1) a three week phase of theoretical input and reflection, focusing on the elaboration and discussion of the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable consumption; (2) a nine-week phase of project work, in which student groups conducted small projects in transdisciplinary collaboration with partners in practice, supervised by their seminar facilitators (lecturers); (3) a two-week presentation and reflection phase, in which students presented the implementation process and the results of their projects and critically reflected on the whole process.

**Results:** As a result, more than a dozen projects were developed that allowed students to develop their skills in designing learning settings and that are still visible today on campus.

### Example A: Swap-Shop *Onion*



**Project idea:** What is useless for one person, may be of great use for another. Students refurbished an abandoned room on campus, turned it into a swap shop and promoted it in a campaign.

**Results:** Today, the *Onion* is well-known well beyond the campus. It serves as a non-commercial marketplace for used goods and the non-monetary exchange of private services.

### Example B: Book.Treasure



**Project idea:** Inspired by public book shelves in major cities like Vienna or Hamburg, students set out to create a public space on campus where books could be dispatched and taken home for free.

**Result:** A book shelf was installed on campus in cooperation with partners like the municipal office for culture that is still in use today.

### Related Publications

Barth, M., Adombent, M., Fischer, D., Richter, S. & Rieckmann, M. (2014). Learning to change universities from within: a service-learning perspective on higher education for sustainable consumption. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 62 (1), 72–81.

Barth, M., Fischer, D., Michelsen, G., Nemnich, C., & Rode, H. (2012). Tackling the knowledge-action gap in sustainable consumption: insights from a participatory school programme. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 6(2), 135–146.

Fischer, D. & Rieckmann, M. (2010). Higher Education for Sustainable Consumption. Concept and Results of a Transdisciplinary Project Course. *Journal of Sustainability Education*, 1 (1), 296–306.

Fischer, D. (2012). Framing Student Participation in Education for Sustainable Development. In M. O'Donoghue (Ed.), *Global Sustainable Development: A Challenge for Consumer Citizens*.

### Example C: Meat-free Cafeteria



**Project idea:** In order to make the food outlet at the university's canteen more sustainable, students developed a campaign in collaboration with the cafeteria operators to raise awareness of meat-free alternatives.

**Results:** In the course of the campaign, the share of vegetarian dishes consumed could be significantly increased.

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